

North West District Sandhill Lakes

2013 Survey Summary

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INTRODUCTION:

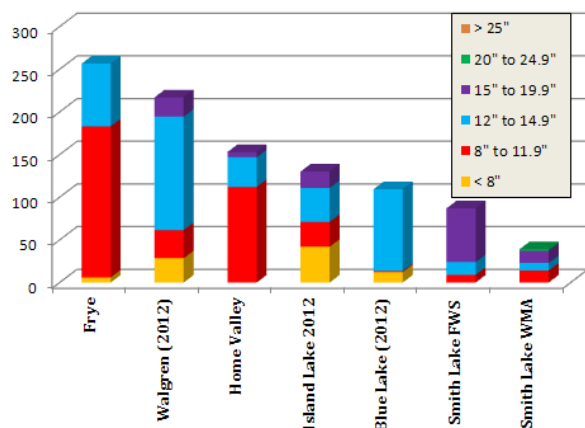
The sandhill region of Nebraska is a unique geographical region comprised of stabilized sand dunes, exposed groundwater lakes in the valleys, and perched mineralized lakes on poorly drained soils. A few lakes are watered by artesian wells and springs while the majority of lakes depend on the water table and fluctuate with its seasonal levels. Most lakes in the sandhill region are either too shallow or too alkaline to support a long-term fishery. Sandhill lakes are typically shallow, vegetated, highly productive systems with fisheries that usually consist of yellow perch, bluegill, black crappie, largemouth bass, northern pike, black bullhead, and green sunfish. The following summary is for sandhill lakes with public access that were surveyed in 2013 or 2012. No data was available for sandhill lakes located on the Valentine NWR during preparation of this summary but information on those lake can be found <http://www.fws.gov/greatplainsfishandwildlife/valentine.html>. Most sandhill lakes get surveyed at least every third year. An interactive map of lake locations and species composition can be found at www.outdoornebraska.ne.gov/gisapps/fishing.asp.

Largemouth Bass:

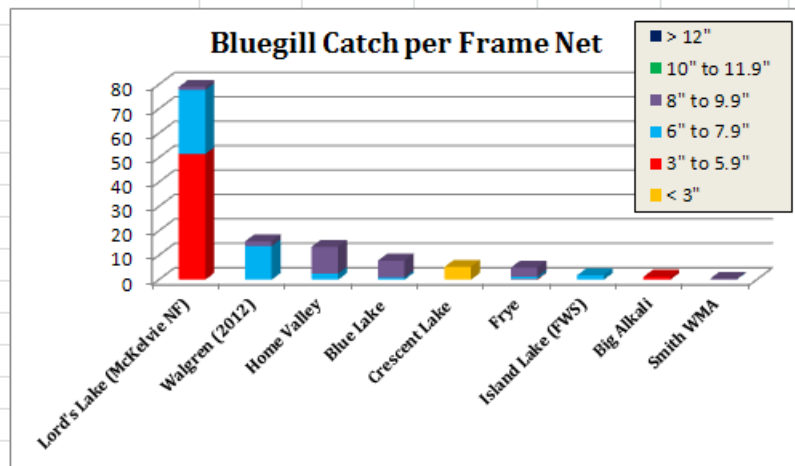
Frye Lake WMA continues to have the highest abundance of largemouth bass in 2013 with 257 bass per hour of electrofishing. This is down from 467 bass per hour in 2012. The average size bass sampled at Frye Lake was 11.3 inches with a few fish approaching legal length (15 inch minimum length). Anglers looking for big fish should consider Smith Lake WMA in Sheridan County. Although the abundance is low, 41 % of the bass in Smith Lake were greater than 15 inches and 5 % were over 20 inches total length. Anglers looking for legal bass (greater than 15 inches) should consider fishing Smith Lake on the Crescent Lake

NWR after it opens for the year on November 1st. Approximately 72 % of the largemouth bass in in Smith Lake (FWS) are over 15 inches. Island lake (FWS) is another water body that should have a good population of legal bass in 2014. It was last surveyed in 2012 and had 40% of the population greater than 12 inches. Anglers looking for a unique opportunity should consider fishing Blue Lake for bass. Blue Lake was stocked with smallmouth bass and had largemouth bass swim upstream from Crescent Lake WMA during high waters. Blue Lake was last surveyed in 2012 but should have some bass approaching legal length.

2013 Largemouth Bass Catch per Hour
Electrofishing



Bluegill:

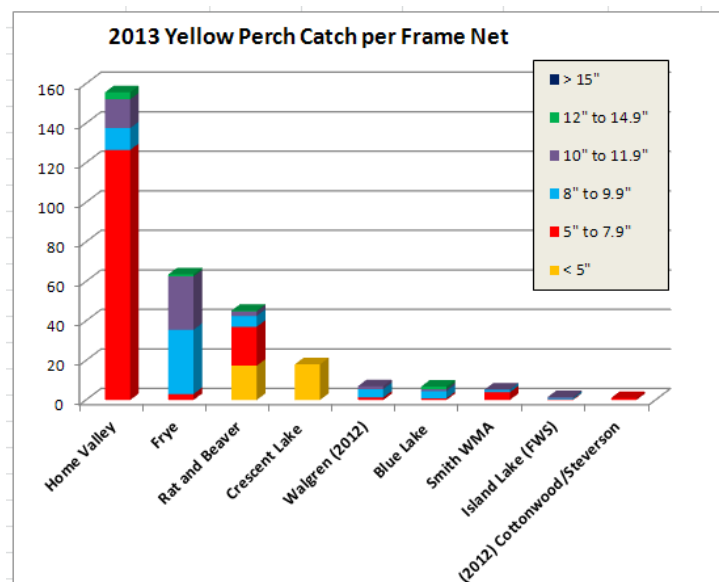


Sandhill lakes are historically known for producing trophy bluegill. These highly productive systems can produce an 8 inch bluegill in as little as 5 years where it may take up to 10 years to produce an 8 inch "gill" in Nebraska's reservoirs or small ponds. The 2013 surveys suggest that anglers looking for the biggest bluegill should try Home Valley Lake WMA or Blue Lake. Crescent Lake WMA had a poor survey in 2013 but should not be overlooked for quality bluegill. Most fish on Crescent should reach 8 inches in 2014. Frye Lake WMA and Smith Lake WMA also will both produce quality bluegill fishing even with lower abundances. Lord's Lake located on the McKelvie National Forest had the highest abundance of bluegill; most of the bluegill were under 6 inches with the biggest fish topping out at 8 inches.

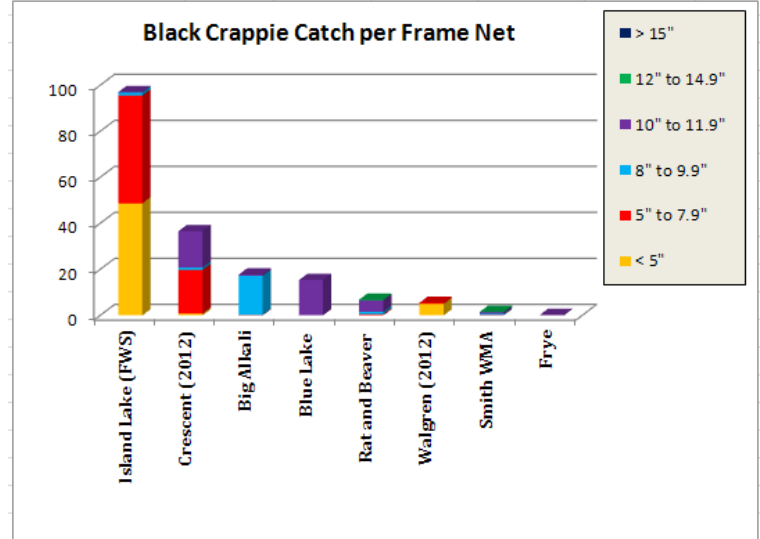
Yellow Perch

Home Valley WMA had the highest abundance of perch in 2013 with 156 perch per frame net. A few big fish remain in Home Valley with 2 % of the population over 12 inches. There are some strong year classes of smaller perch coming up to provide some good fishing in the future as 81 % of the perch in Home Valley were under 8 inches. Frye Lake WMA had the highest abundance of larger perch with 28 fish per frame net greater than 10 inches. Rat and Beaver Lake WMA has a fair perch population with some fish greater than 12 inches but is scheduled to be renovated in 2014 to remove carp and improve the overall fishery.

Ice fishing pressure from 2011 to 2013 did a number on the Blue Lake yellow perch population. Frame net surveys went from 176 perch per net in 2011, to 39 per net in 2012, to only 7 per net in 2013. There are a few bigger fish left in Blue Lake, but it will take several years of reduced pressure to increase perch abundance.



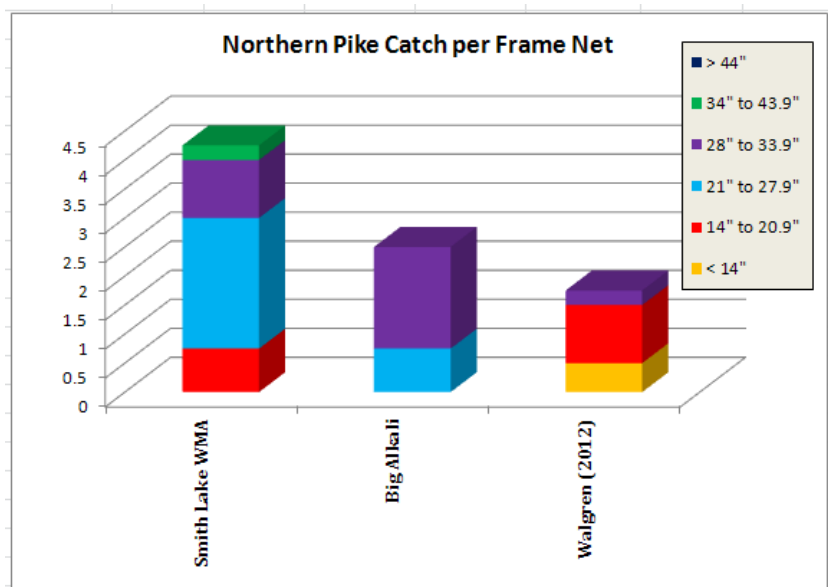
Crappie:



Crappie anglers should expect another great season in the Sandhills. Island Lake FWS has the highest density of crappie in 2013 with 97 crappies per frame net comprised of both white and black crappie. Most of these fish are small but anglers should see great crappie fishing on Island in the next couple years. Anglers looking for big crappie should fish Blue Lake, Crescent Lake WMA, Rat and Beaver Lake WMA, or Smith Lake WMA. All of these areas have good populations of crappie that are greater than 10 inches. Crescent Lake was not surveyed for crappie in 2013 but had the highest catch rate in 2012 with 36 fish per net with 43% greater than 10 inches.

Northern Pike:

Several sandhill lakes have quality northern pike populations. Smith Lake WMA will be the top lake in 2014 for northern pike for both abundance and size. The average size northern pike surveyed in Smith Lake was 25.6 inches with 29% of the population greater than 28 inches. Big Alkali WMA also has a good abundance of larger pike with 70% of its population greater than 28 inches. Valentine NWR also has several lakes open to public fishing with great northern pike populations. Top fishing tactics for pike include spinner baits, spoons, jerk baits, and plastic swimbaits. Chubs or live minnows on a slip bobber can produce fast pike action in lakes where live baitfish are legal.



Other Species

Green sunfish and black bullheads are two native species to the sandhill region of Nebraska and several lakes provide fishing opportunities. Common carp are plentiful in many sandhill lakes and can cause undesirable impacts to the fisheries. Anglers are encouraged to fish for and keep carp from sandhill lakes. Contact the local fisheries offices for tips on where to look for these species.

Frye Lake WMA and Island Lake FWS both have walleye. Island was stocked in 2013 and will take a couple years to get a population of harvestable fish. Crescent Lake WMA was stocked with sauger in 2013 and should produce catchable fish in a couple years. Cottonwood and Steverson Lake WMA has a good musky population with some fish over 40 inches.

Catch and Release

Sandhill lakes are typically smaller lakes that get a lot of localized fishing pressure during hot bites. It is encouraged to practice selective harvest and not keep every big fish that you catch. These lakes can and do get over harvested at times of heavy pressure. Sandhill lakes are managed through daily bag limits and possession limits. If you have a possession limit of fish in your freezer, you must not harvest any more fish until those fish are used up .



**Heavy ice fishing pressure during a week day
on Blue Lake 2013**

Fishing Regulations:

Panfish: The daily Bag limit for panfish (bluegill, crappie, yellow perch, rock bass, all sunfish and hybrids) is 15 in combination with a possession limit of 30.

Largemouth Bass: The daily bag limit for black bass (largemouth, smallmouth and spotted bass) is 5 in combination with a possession limit of 10. Bass must be at least 15 inches total length and only one bass may be 21 inches or longer.

Northern Pike: The daily bag limit for northern pike is 3 fish with a possession limit of 10. On the Valentine NWR, northern pike must be under 28 inches total length.

***Several lakes have special bait restrictions, access restrictions, hours of operation, and boating regulations. Read the current boating and fishing guides prior to fishing sandhills lakes.**

For additional information about fisheries management in the sandhills please contact the following personnel by phone or email address listed below.

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